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February 2013

Public Health Column for Independent Record

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Learning The ABCs of Hepatitis

Do you know someone who has been diagnosed with hepatitis and is ashamed to admit it?

Because hepatitis is sometimes associated with unprotected sex and shared drug paraphernalia, the diagnosis unfortunately carries a stigma in the minds of some people.

But that shouldn't stop anyone from seeking medical attention if they think they could have this contagious liver disease. Millions of Americans may have it without realizing it, and tens of thousands die every year.

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver, that powerhouse organ we depend on to process nutrients and clear our bodies of toxic waste products. Chronic hepatitis is a serious disease that can lead to long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, and even death.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently recommended that everyone born from 1945 to 1965 – the baby boomers – should be tested for Hepatitis C. Baby boomers are five times more likely to be infected and may have no symptoms. But as they age, there's a greater chance they'll develop serious, life-threatening liver disease.

Hepatitis actually is a collection of contagious liver diseases caused by different viruses. Each is designated by a different letter of the alphabet. Hepatitis A, B, and C are the most common in the United States; D and E also exist, mostly in other parts of the world. All can be detected with simple blood tests.

Although each can cause similar flu-like symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. Hepatitis C is the most serious.

If you've had one type of hepatitis, it's still possible to get the other types. Vaccines can protect you against Hepatitis A and B.

People with Hepatitis B or C should avoid alcohol and check with a health professional before taking any medications or supplements, because these can potentially exacerbate liver damage.

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is to protect and improve the health of all county residents.*

Hepatitis A

This virus is usually spread through food or water contaminated by feces from an infected person. You can get it by:

- eating food prepared by someone who didn't wash his hands after using the bathroom or changing a diaper;
- having certain types of unprotected sex with an infected partner; or
- drinking contaminated water, usually in foreign countries with poor water treatment systems.

Hep A can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a severe illness lasting several months. Symptoms usually last less than two months and may include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, joint pain, abdominal pain, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

Almost everyone who gets Hep A recovers completely, without treatment and with no lasting liver damage. Rates of this disease are the lowest they've been in 40 years thanks to a vaccine introduced in 1995. It's now widely available for anyone over age 1.

Hepatitis B

This virus causes a more serious infection that can lead to cirrhosis, or permanent scarring of the liver. It spreads through contact with an infected person's blood or other body fluid, for example through unprotected sex or unsterilized needles. An infected woman can pass it to her baby at birth.

Hep B may be acute, lasting a few weeks, or chronic, developing into a serious, lifelong illness. A vaccine was developed in 1990, causing an 82 percent decline in cases. Children are now routinely vaccinated.

Hepatitis C

This is the most serious form of hepatitis. It accounts for about 15,000 deaths in the United States each year and is one of the most common reasons for liver transplants in adults. Like Hep B, it's transmitted through blood or other body fluids.

Liver disease, cancer, and deaths from Hep C are on the rise in this country. More than 75 percent of the adults infected by this virus are baby boomers.

Scientists aren't sure why the boomers have been hit so hard. According to the CDC, these adults may have become infected during the 1970s and 80s, when rates of the disease were at their highest. Before 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply in the United States began, Hep C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

Since chronic Hep C can go unnoticed for several decades, baby boomers could be living with an infection that occurred many years ago. Although there is no vaccine or cure, the virus can be detected with a simple blood test and successfully treated with medications.

What's Your Risk?

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The CDC offers a free, online risk assessment for hepatitis. It takes about five minutes, and you get a personalized report. You can find it at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/RiskAssessment/

The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department provides Hep A and B immunizations on a walk-in basis Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at 1930 Ninth Ave. No appointment is needed, and we can bill insurance.

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